

# LECTURE

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## Honoring America's Superpower Responsibilities

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### Abstract

*On April 8, 2013, Walter Lohman, director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation, took part in the 51st annual International Affairs Symposium at Lewis & Clark College of Arts and Sciences. In a debate with former Congressman Barney Frank (D-MA) on America's role in the world, Lohman argued that retrenchment and escalation are false choices—that continued American leadership is what is necessary to preserve peace, prosperity, and freedom in many corners of the globe, especially in Asia. The following is Lohman's opening statement.*

**T**hank you for having me here today. I have to say, at first, it sounded like a setup. Lewis & Clark College has quite a reputation as a liberal institution. But the director of the symposium, Professor Bob Mandel, speaks so sincerely about his interest in developing diversity of opinion, I'm starting to believe it. I spent some time today with students touring the campus. I was quite impressed by them and by how seriously they take this program. It is an honor that you would make me a part of it.

At the outset, I told the organizers that, although I am eager to argue against retrenchment of American power, I would not argue for "escalation." I don't know an international affairs program in the country where "escalation" is a good thing. Besides, the panel title—"Tidal Shift: Promoting Military Retrenchment or Escalation"—presents a false dichotomy. Retrenchment and escalation are not our only choices.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/h1230>

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### KEY POINTS

- Military retrenchment or escalation—these are not America's only choices. The other choice—the right choice—is continued American leadership in the service of America's global responsibilities.
- American leadership has brought about the most peaceful, prosperous, and free world in history.
- The U.S. has a military in the Pacific capable of maintaining the peace so that small conflicts don't become big wars. The U.S. needs to maintain and extend its economic leadership; this means opening markets further.
- The scope of America's responsibilities is derived from its size and power. The quality of its engagement, and of the outcomes, is derived from its adherence to universal values.
- America cannot withdraw from the world. If it does, either by imposing trade barriers or drawing down military commitments, it loses its ability to influence events—which will hurt the United States, as well as much of the world.

The other choice, and the case I am prepared to make, is for continued American leadership in the service of our global responsibilities. American troops, planes, and ships stationed abroad, and occasional armed intervention, sometimes war, are necessary parts of what enables our leadership. But they are not the main thing.

American leadership has brought about the most peaceful, prosperous, and free world in the history of mankind. *This* is the main thing. This vision of a better world is the principal source of American power. Our military and economic strength abroad are only strengths to the extent that they serve it. Retrenchment—by contrast—is a narrow, selfish view of American power that says, “I’ll take care of my own, you take care of yours.” Some of our friends abroad may think that way. But the world can’t afford America following suit.

Americans have a responsibility to be bigger people than that. Because as Franklin Roosevelt wrote about American leadership: “Great power involves great responsibility.” Imagine if, in the 1930s, the U.S. had a military presence in Asia that prevented Japan from invading China. We would have avoided the massive human tragedy of the Pacific war—a war where American men and women died in the tens of thousands on islands they had never heard of before. In 2013, we do have a military presence in the Pacific that prevents China from even contemplating an invasion of Japan or, more to the point, of Taiwan. We have a Navy in the Pacific capable of protecting the seas and maintaining the peace so that small conflicts don’t become big wars. I’m for maintaining these capacities to keep the peace.

I’ve been to China multiple times. I went the first time in 1995. I’m going again in a few weeks. What is going on in China is not simple. China is absolutely not destined to be our enemy.

China is also, however, not destined to be our friend. Even so, we have maintained a policy of engagement with China for 40 years. That’s a good thing. I want the U.S. and China to be in constant contact. It helps avoid dangerous misunderstandings. I want American companies to invest there as much as they see fit. I want them to trade with China. I want Chinese companies to invest in the U.S. I sure as heck want the choice of buying Chinese-made products.

China’s rise is a reality. Period. We have to learn how to deal with that. But whether, in the long run,

China will be friend or foe, none of us know. We don’t know where, in the next 10, 20, 30 years, threats are going to develop. The U.S. needs to maintain a full spectrum of power, including military power, to guard against this uncertainty, and to protect our vision. And, given the long lead times involved in developing the necessary technology and forward deployments, it requires long-term planning.

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This debate is not about China or any other particular current global threat. It is about whether, as Roosevelt put it, Americans choose to deny their nation’s responsibilities.

I admit that American leadership is also self-interested. We sometimes have difficult choices to make. We cannot correct every wrong in the world. However, wherever we can, we should try to define our interests in the context of broader, more enlightened ones.

Far more often than not, that is just what the U.S. has done. We didn’t seek to forever occupy Japan or Korea. We sought to establish a military presence in each that would keep the peace. Those governments—both sides of their political spectrums—want us there. It is true also for our presence in Europe. And, wherever we are, when our host nation asks us to leave, whether it’s the Filipinos or the Iraqis, we leave.

After World War II, the U.S. didn’t force the nations it defeated to buy its goods; it created an open trading system that would maximize benefits for all nations. That’s how we ended up with the economic miracles of Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. It’s how China ended up being the second largest economy in the world. It’s how they lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty.

The U.S. needs to maintain and extend its economic leadership. This means opening markets further. All the nations in Asia are negotiating free trade agreements with one another. The U.S. has just three agreements in the region: with Singapore, South Korea, and Australia. Now, the Obama Administration is negotiating the 12-nation

Transpacific Partnership (TPP) to make up lost ground. It's a great idea. We should also find new trading partners there—Taiwan, Thailand, and India. Thankfully, President Obama will find a willing Congress. The politics of free trade are pretty much settled. A free trade agreement has never failed to pass the U.S. Congress.

When it comes to promoting political freedom, I'm not saying the U.S. has not made mistakes. I am saying that without liberty as part of the conversation with our friends and allies, many millions in Asia would not be free today. It is no coincidence that democracy has developed most thoroughly in the countries where the U.S. is most deeply involved: Japan, South Korea, Taiwan. Our allies know that our vision is part of the deal. Yes, Marcos stayed in power in the Philippines for too long and with American support. But it was also the U.S. that told him it was time to go. We put up with dictators in Korea, Taiwan, and Indonesia, too, but even as they helped us win the Cold War, we didn't stop talking to them about freedom, and that pressure ultimately contributed to democratic outcomes.

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Those considering an Asia with less American presence have to ask themselves whether freedom would do as well without us. In fact, proponents of American withdrawal have to ask themselves a more important question: Whether they have responsibility for anyone's well-being but their own!

Times are, indeed, changing in Asia. Power is shifting. I have traveled to Asia quite a bit—easily 50 times over the course of my career. I've seen the change first-hand. One thing that is not changing is that the U.S. is the one “indispensable” ingredient for continued peace, prosperity, and freedom around the world. Everyone I talk to in Asia tells me that. They must be talking to President Obama, too, because he's also used the word “indispensable” to describe America's role in the world.

Of course, these countries want access to our markets and our capital. But on the diplomatic side,

it is also the case that the U.S. is the closest thing in Asia to an honest broker. And because if anything, nationalist tensions in Asia are only growing, this is not going to change anytime soon. Sure, there are South Koreans who would rather not have American troops in their country. But they are not the majority. And they like us a whole heck of a lot more than they like the prospect of another invasion. They like us a lot better than they like the Japanese. Imagine how the Koreans feel about the prospect of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons to defend itself. That's what they would have to do without the benefit of the American nuclear deterrent.

U.S. presence has been essential to peace on the Korean peninsula and many other places around the world. The cost of conflict undeterred is much higher in casualties and economic impact than preventing war—which is what we have done again and again, worldwide. It is a responsibility we ought to continue to honor.

Now, advocates for withdrawal from the world often say that there are *some* missions (security guarantees for Taiwan, South Korea) that the U.S. ought to continue. I agree with these. I'd add a few more to encompass all of our treaty commitments, but in these cases, I certainly agree.

The problem is that, if you deprive the U.S. military of the means to carry out these missions, your support is just rhetoric. It is actually a sort of backhanded isolationism. Without our troops in Japan, and greater capability just over the horizon, the troops we have in South Korea (more than 28,000 flesh and blood men and women) are just speed bumps. The Seventh Fleet is based in Japan. You can't defend Taiwan without it. You need Marines in Okinawa. You need forces in Guam.

In this day and age, if having troops in Europe was all about defending Germany from Russian invasion, I think I might be inclined to draw down there, too. But it's not about that. Our troops in Europe are about defending our mutual interests in the neighborhood around it. If we have to get our military involved again in the Middle East, those troops are going to come from bases in Europe. When our injured are evacuated, they're going to be flown seven hours to a top-rate American military hospital in Germany.

The truth is, and isolationists know this, that if you starve the military of the resources to carry out its missions, those missions will shrink—even as you claim to support some of the most critical ones.

When you withdraw from the world, either by imposing trade barriers or drawing down military commitments, you lose your ability to influence events. In fact, the opposite happens, and events dictate to you. As Americans, we lose our ability to realize our vision, and secure the interests that are tied to that vision. If we're not negotiating free trade agreements, we're not going to be the ones writing the rules. If we're not contributing troops to NATO, we're not going to have a hand in where and how Europe uses its forces.

You know, coming here from The Heritage Foundation, I know I'm positioned here as the ideologue. But as a nation, *America* has an ideology. It's not left-wing or right-wing. It's the American

ideology of liberty. It is this cause that has motivated American involvement in international affairs since its founding.

I make no apology for it.

The U.S. cannot withdraw from the world. The scope of its responsibilities is derived from its size and power. The quality of its engagement—and the quality of the outcomes it has achieved—is derived from its adherence to universal values. The world is more peaceful, prosperous, and free today because of the United States of America.

It will not remain so if we retreat from our responsibilities.

—*Walter Lohman is the Director of the Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation.*